

Progress: The Boundless Quest

by Mark F. Sharlow

Progress!

The word conjures up images of airplanes and rocket ships, of miracle cures and new energy sources – all remarkable signs of humanity's quest to be more than it now is.

Since the early days of the world, the remarkable beings known as human have aspired toward something beyond present reality. This hope takes many forms: the desire for liberation from disease and death; the urge to explore new places, be they earthly islands or other planets; the wish for a good society and a good world. All of these yearnings and impulses – and many others – are examples of the basic drive for progress that is part of what makes us human.

Progress takes many forms. The progress of technology is only one of those forms, and is the most visible form of progress in our time. Other forms of forward movement also are examples of progress. There are social and political progress, which lead toward greater freedom and prosperity in the world. There is artistic

progress, which adds new schools and styles to the arts. There is progress in philosophy and religion, replacing outdated and intolerant forms of belief with better ones. The diversity of progress is as great as the diversity of human existence itself.

Those who doubt progress, or who think progress is dangerous, usually are thinking of the misuse of technology. People sometimes use new inventions in ways that hurt the environment, magnify the damage of war, or dehumanize work. However, we cannot blame progress for these wrong uses of technology. The destructive use of technology is not a fruit of progress itself. Instead, it is a result of incomplete progress – of possibilities that have not yet flowered into their final forms. Today’s automobile engines make life better in many ways, but they also harm the environment and make nations dependent on oil. Future engines, based on solar and other technologies, will not cause these problems. The discovery of nuclear energy gave rise to nuclear weapons and dirty power plants. World peace efforts and the spread of democracy can erode the threat of nuclear war – and someday we may tame the force of the hydrogen bomb into clean nuclear fusion power.

Some claim the ideal of progress is out of date. These skeptics believe that enthusiasm about progress belonged only to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The doubters claim that we now know better, and that technology is a mixed blessing at best. These naysayers forget an important fact: we do not have to mimic the ways in which the 19th Century used (and abused) technology. Instead, we can have a better version of progress, more in tune with the environment and with human needs.

The smoke-belching industrial plants of earlier times gave way to cleaner plants. Even now, old energy sources are becoming obsolete with the rise of new “green” sources of power. The dehumanizing factory conditions of the Industrial Revolution fell with rise of social progress – and eventually will fall throughout the whole world. The solution to abusive mechanization is not less progress, but more progress. We must complete the transition to a truly advanced world.

Instead of being skeptical of progress, we should work to make progress go far – far enough to solve any problems that technology might have created in the past. The solution is not less progress, but more and better progress.

Progress itself is undergoing progress.

Reach for the stars. This metaphorical expression for seeking high goals might also serve as a slogan for progress. In embracing progress, humanity reaches for the stars in many ways. The literal voyage to worlds beyond Earth is one part of this outreach. Throughout history, the stars have symbolized what is beyond, what seems out of reach – at least for today. Progress is an expedition to what is beyond, to what is next – to what seems impossible. The goal might be a rocket to Mars, a cure for cancer, a more humane social order, or a new source of electrical power. Whatever the aim, progress always is a quest for the “stars” – for the distant, luminous possibilities that call to those who dare to look beyond their immediate surroundings and their own times.